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Citation style: Labuk Tomasz. (2016). Preliminary remarks on Byzantine literary perception(s) of fatness (11th to 12th centuries). "Scripta Classica" (Vol. 13 (2016), s. 101-114).



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Preliminary remarks on Byzantine Literary Perception(s) of Fatness (11th to 12th Centuries)¹

Abstract: The article discusses various ways in which fat body was represented and used as a means of social, religious and political critique in Byzantine literature from eleventh to twelfth century. The analysis is put within a broader context and traces the sources of the discourse of overindulgence to ancient Greek tradition (Plato, Aristophanes, Athenaeus), as well as to Christian frameworks (Old and New Testament, Church Fathers).

Key words: Byzantium, fatness, gluttony, ancient literature.

We live in a world of striking paradoxes. As Martín Caparrós has shown in his recent and disturbing bestseller entitled *Hunger (El Hambre)*, every ninth inhabitant of the Earth is starving. At the very same time the obesity rates in the “first-world” countries are peaking. In the social realities of the industrialised West, food is omnipresent. Eating has become a modern-day obsession to such a point that there has even emerged an interdisciplinary scholarly field of fat studies which aims to challenge and undermine prevalent negative stereotypes associated to fatness.²

¹ This article is a part of project funded by the National Science Centre Poland within the scheme of the Programme “Sonata-Bis 3”, project title: “Intellectual History of 12th-Century Byzantium – Adaptation and Appropriation of Ancient Literature”, grant number: UMO-2013/10/E/HS2/00170.

² See e.g. *Fat Studies. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society*; *The Oxford Handbook of the Social Science of Obesity*. Ed. J. Cawley. Oxford 2011. E.D. Rothblum: *The*

Eating in Byzantium

Nonetheless, there is nothing new about this modern obsession with consumption. Indeed, eleventh- as well as twelfth-century Byzantine literati seem to have been equally obsessed with what and how others ate, and reproaching individuals for their gluttony, drunkenness or obesity was a literary *topos* widely explored by the authors of the period.

Historical and archaeological scholarship on Byzantine foodstuffs and dietary prescriptions is prolific. The seminal and widely quoted study of Koukoules, still remains the most wide-ranging scholarly analysis of Byzantine food culture.³ The vast work of Johannes Koder has brought new insights into the provision of fresh food products in Constantinople, Byzantine eating habits and Byzantine cuisine.⁴ Of no less value is the work of Ilias Anagnostakis, who enriched scholarly perspective on Byzantine food consumption with many insights.⁵ Andrew Dalby's *Siren Feast* and *Flavours of Byzantium* offered some pioneering insights into Byzantine cuisine⁶, while Ewald Kislinger added significant contributions to the field.⁷

Fat Studies Reader. New York 2009. For the definition of the field see E. Rothblum: *Fat Studies*. In: *The Oxford Handbook of the Social Science of Obesity...*, p. 174. The applicability of this theoretical framework to Medieval literature is highly questionable. The scholars within the field perceive themselves as a part of what they call as "fat pride community" or the "size acceptance movement", which are social concepts that are totally alien to any Medieval society. Moreover, even though one of the aims of the field is to understand the sources of modern perceptions of fatness, vast majority of the publications within the field is concerned only with modern societies and cultures. In this sense, it seems that rather medievalists might contribute to the fat studies, not the other way round.

³ P. Koukoules: *Βυζαντινὸν βίος καὶ πολιτισμός, τ. Ε'. Αἱ τροφαὶ καὶ τὰ πότα*. Athens 1952.

⁴ E.g.: J. Koder: "Η καθημερινή διατροφή στο Βυζάντιο με βάση τις πηγές". In: *Βυζαντινὸν Διατροφή καὶ Μαγειρεία*. Ed. D. Papanikola-Bakirtzi. Athens 2005, pp. 17–30. J. Koder: "Stew and Salted Meat – Opulent Normality in the Diet of Every Day?". In: *Eat, Drink and Be Merry (Luke 12:19). Food and Wine in Byzantium*. Eds. L. Brubaker, K. Linardou. Aldershot 2007, pp. 59–72. J. Koder: "Everyday Food in the Middle Byzantine Period". In: *Flavours and Delights. Tastes and Pleasures of Ancient and Byzantine Cuisine*. Ed. I. Anagnostakis. Athens 2013, pp. 139–156.

⁵ I. Anagnostakis: *Byzantinos oinikos politismos*. Athens: Ethniko Idryma Erevnon 2008. I. Anagnostakis, T. Papamastorakis: "...And Radishes for Appetizers. On Banquets, Radishes and Wine". In: *Βυζαντινὸν Διατροφή*, pp. 147–174.

⁶ A. Dalby: *Siren Feasts: A History of Food and Gastronomy in Greece*. London: Routledge 1996. Idem: *Flavours of Byzantium: The Cuisine of a Legendary Empire*. Devon: Prospect 2003.

⁷ E.g.: E. Kislinger: "Christians of the East: Rules and Realities of the Byzantine Diet". In: *Food. Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present*. Eds. J.-L. Flandrin, M. Montanari. New York 1996, pp. 194–206. E. Kislinger: "Being and Well-Being in Byzantium: The Case of Beverages". In: *Material Culture and Well-Being in Byzantium (400–153)*. Eds. M. Grünbart, E. Kislinger, A. Muthesius, D. Stathakopoulos. Wien 2007, pp. 147–154.

Last but not least, one could not omit a series of studies on Byzantine diet conducted by a Polish Byzantinist Maciej Kokoszko.⁸

Copious though it may seem, the field lacks almost completely in literary analyses of various uses of food, cuisine-related terms, literary representations of physical acts of consumption as well as the meaning of fat bodies – the area on which I intend to focus in the second part of this article.⁹ Although Byzantine literary texts form the core of the studies mentioned above, Byzantine food scholarship, for the major part, has paid almost no attention to literary tradition within which they emerged, their complex intertextual allusiveness, or has even ignored the very fact that the Byzantines produced and read literature chiefly for pleasure.¹⁰

Such approach leads sometimes to baffling results. Jonathan Harris, commenting on the realities of 12th-century Constantinople, quotes a passage from Niketas Choniates' *Chronike Diegesis*, which derides John of Poutza, a gluttonous official from the retinue of emperor Manuel Komnenos.¹¹ In the scene, John cannot curb his appetite for his beloved meal and, on his way back home, he has to stop by in a roadside tavern to have his fill of the soup. He gulps it down, paying two obols to the tavern keeper. Harris, taking what is written at face value, concludes that the price of a bowl of soup equalled to two bronze coins in the 12th-century Constantinople. Yet, as I argue elsewhere, the entire episode might be as well a literary fiction, which, through subtle intertextual hints, refers the reader to Aristophanes' comedies.¹²

Similarly, E. Kislinger, discussing another portrait of a drunken imperial official, John Kamateros, depicted by Choniates,¹³ concludes that some officials, inspired by the introduction of new extravagant customs in the twelfth century, went as far as drinking seven litres of water directly from a huge vase. Once again, such

⁸ See for example: *Dietetyka i sztuka kulinarna antyku i wczesnego Bizancjum (II–VII w.). Część II: Pokarm dla Ciała i Ducha. [Dietetics and Culinary art of Ancient and Early Byzantine Period (2nd–7th Century). Part II: Nourishment for the Body and the Soul]*. Ed. M. Kokoszko. Łódź 2014.

⁹ Significant exceptions to this trend are the following studies: M. Alexiou: *The Poverty of Écriture and the Craft of Writing: "Towards a Reappraisal of the Prodic Poems"*. *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 1986, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 1–40. Idem: *"Ploys of Performance: Games and Play in the Ptochoprodromic Poems"*. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 2009, Vol. 53, pp. 91–109. Also: *Eat Drink and Be Merry...* Eds. E. Broubaker, K. Linardou: *Feast, Fast or Famine. Food and Drinks in Byzantium*. Eds. W. Meyer, S. Trzcionka. Brisbane 2005.

¹⁰ On the pleasure of reading in Byzantium see e.g.: *Plotting with Eros: Essays on the Poetics of Love and the Erotics of Reading*. Ed. I. Nilsson. Copenhagen 2009.

¹¹ J. Harris: *Constantinople, Capital of Byzantium*. London 2007, p. 112. *Niketae Choniatae Historia*. Ed. J.-L. van Dieten. New York–Berlin 1970, 57.53–63 (hereafter referred to as vD). The passage is discussed thoroughly in T. Labuk: *"Aristophanes in the service of Niketas Choniates – Gluttony, Drunkenness and Politics in the Χρονική Διήγησις"*. *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 2016, Vol. 66, pp. 127–152 (forthcoming).

¹² E. Kislinger: *"Being and Well-being..."*, p. 153; T. Labuk: *"Aristophanes..."*.

¹³ vD 113.87–114.10.

a reading ignores the fact that Choniates operates here with well-known literary *topoi* which stemmed from the comedic tradition – such as drinking wine from huge “breathless” cups or engaging in drunken wagers.¹⁴ As I, again, argue elsewhere, the wording used by Choniates in the passage seems to refer the reader to Athenaeus and Aristophanes, adding layers of additional covert meanings. Such a reading is all the more possible if we consider that both of these ancient authors were widely read and studied by the Byzantines.¹⁵ The episode, once again, might as well never have happened at all, but its historical veracity was, in my opinion, not a chief aim of Choniates.¹⁶

Still, the most extreme example of such a word for word reading has been recently proposed by a Polish scholar, Anna Kotłowska.¹⁷ Quoting one of the letters composed by a twelfth-century intellectual, Michael Italikos, to Theodore Prodromos, Kotłowska concludes that the Byzantines disliked cheese and incorrectly linked the Greek word for a tyrant (τύραννος) with a noun which denoted cheese (τυρός). What Kotłowska seems to ignore, is the fact that Italikos, an accomplished scholar and a thoroughly educated author, might be simply poking fun at Prodromos – a polymath and an author of numerous witty literary satires.¹⁸

Byzantine “fat savages”

Sadly enough, this seeming lack of interest in deeper meanings pertains to the co-related field of literary depictions of fatness in Byzantine literature.¹⁹ Ex-

¹⁴ See the discussion of this passage in: T. Labuk: “Aristophanes’ and R. Maisano’s commentary in *Niceta Coniata. Grandezza e Catastrofe di Bisanzio*, Vol. I. Ed. A. Pontani. 1994, p. 594, n. 42.

¹⁵ See for example: A. Markopoulos: “De la structure de l’école byzantine. Le maître, les livres et le processus éducatif”. In: *Lire et écrire à Byzance*. Ed. B. Mondrain. Paris 2006, pp. 85–96.

¹⁶ Warren Treadgold has unconvincingly argued that the anecdotes about John of Poutze and John Kamateros are “trivial exaggerations” which Choniates “must have heard from someone”. However, such a claim is not only unsubstantiated by the internal evidence from the *Chronike Diegesis*, but also (again) it depreciates Choniates’ literary talent and tradition within which he operated: W. Treadgold: “The Unwritten Rules for Writing Byzantine History”. In: *Proceedings of the 23rd International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Belgrade 22–27 August 2016*. Belgrade 2016, pp. 277–292 at 286. Cf. T. Labuk: “Aristophanes...”.

¹⁷ A. Kotłowska: *Zwierzęta w kulturze literackiej Bizantyńczyków – Αναβλέψατε εις τα πετεινά. [Animals in the Byzantine literary culture – Αναβλέψατε εις τα πετεινά...]*. Poznań 2014, p. 160.

¹⁸ Michel Italikos. *Lettres et discours*. Ed. P. Gautier. Paris 1972, pp. 237–238. On the joke itself see n. 5 on p. 237: “Italikos s’est amusé à forger une étymologie les anciens avouaient leur ignorance”.

¹⁹ For the most recent analysis of the late antique discourse on bodily temperance see: M. Puijula: *Körper und christlichen Lebensweise. Clemens von Alexandria und sein Paidagogos*. Berlin and New York 2006.

cept from Alexander Kazhdan's and Simon Franklin's study of different accounts of the revolt of John Komnenos the Fat, as well as Liz James' and Anthony Eastmond's article on the consequences of gluttony,²⁰ the topic of representation of fat body in the middle and late Byzantine periods seems to be practically untouched. While some additional insights can be added to both of the quoted studies, my aim in the subsequent part of this article will be to suggest some additional methods of literary representations of fatness within Byzantine literature.

Undoubtedly, Byzantine discourse of obesity and gluttony stemmed on the one hand from ancient Greek tradition, on the other, from Christian frameworks, both of which have been finally blended into a uniform system of thought. It is hard not to discern Platonic threads within the discourse itself. In his *Timaeus* Plato speaks of the lower mortal soul, which is the seat of "fearful and necessary passions" (δεινὰ καὶ ἀναγκαῖα ἐν ἑαυτῷ παθήματα), among which there is a desire for pleasure, "the greatest attraction to evil" (μέγιστον κακοῦ δέλεαρ). As Plato argues, the gods mixed all other irrational sensations along with this urge (αἰσθήσει δὲ ἀλόγῳ καὶ ἐπιχειρητῇ παντὸς ἔρωτι συγκερασάμενοι).²¹ Accordingly, the lowly mortal soul was placed by the gods in another part of the body (i.e. the chest), to prevent the defilement of the immortal and godly soul, which was situated in the human head. The lowest part of the mortal soul (which is close to a *savage creature* – ὡς θρέμμα ἄγριον), responsible for the intake of food and drink, was situated as far as possible from the rational immortal soul, that is in the belly (γαστήρ). Such a solution ensured that the rational soul was distanced maximally from the inescapable bodily appetites (70d–e). But, as Plato argues further on, since the body must be fed in order to continue to live, the appetite for food and drink cannot be simply subdued and the rational soul must exert constant control over the mortal soul. When it fails to do so, the basest desires take charge of a human being.²²

Analogous frameworks, imbued with additional Christian connotations, can be gleaned from numerous passages from the Church Fathers, chiefly John Chrysostom and Clement of Alexandria. I would not like to engage in a detailed analysis of their outlooks on bodily overindulgence; hence I shall limit the discussion only to a number of representative quotations. Gluttony, according to both John and Clement, leads inevitably to fatness (πολυσαρκία), and to the utter perdition of one's soul. The very term used frequently to denote obesity, πολυσαρκία, bears strong connections with animality and savagery. Chrysostom uses this noun in his *Ninth Homily on the Hexaemeron* where, in his description of the elephants,

²⁰ A. Kazhdan, S. Franklin: *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the 11th and 12th Centuries*. Cambridge 1984, pp. 242–255. A. Eastmond, L. James: "Eat, Drink ... and pay the price". In: *Eat, Drink and be Merry...*, pp. 175–189.

²¹ *Platonis opera*, vol. 4. Ed. J. Burnet. Oxford 1902 (repr. 1968), 69c–d.

²² See the discussion by S.E. Hill: *Eating to Excess. The Meaning of Gluttony and Fat Body in the Ancient World*. Santa Barbara 2011, pp. 43–61.

he calls them “the mountains of flesh” (βουνοὶ τινες σάρκινοι).²³ Further, in his *Sermo Against the Jews*, he discerns:

But what is the source of this hardness? It come from gluttony and drunkenness. Who say so? Moses himself. “Israel ate and was filled and the darling grew fat and frisky”. When brute animals (τὰ ἄλογα) feed from a full manger, they grow plump and become more obstinate and hard to hold in check; they endure neither the yoke, the reins, nor the hand of the charioteer.²⁴

It is clear from the passage that living by one’s stomach renders one closer to a wild animal. In the *Paedagogus* Clement openly declares that those who live with the sole intention to eat are like irrational animals, for whom life is nothing more than their belly.²⁵ According to Clement, the proper name for those who live to eat is a “savage tribe of parasites” (II.1.7.3: ἄγρια τῶν παρασίτων φύλα), for they live “wallowing on their bellies” (II.1.7.6: ἐπὶ γαστέρας ἔρποντες). After the image of their father, himself a gluttonous beast (II.1.7.6–7: κατ’ εἰκόνα τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτῶν τοῦ λίχνου θηρίου), they resemble rather wild beasts clothed in the form of men (θηρία ἀνδρεῖκελα).²⁶ Last, but not least, in the 35th *Homily on the Acts of the Apostles* Chrysostom compares the fat to the seals who drag their bodies along,²⁷ commenting further that eating from dawn until dusk is the property of an irrational beast.²⁸ A fat glutton spends his life in idleness, he has nothing manly in his appearance and resembling rather a savage beast in the shape of a man, and is unable to rise from his bed due to the elephant-like weight of his body.²⁹

As can be seen from this brief summary, overindulgence in corporeal delights, along with fatness which stems from it, perceived as emblems of savagery

²³ Basile de Césarée. *Homélies sur l’hexaéméron*. Ed. S. Giet. Paris 1968, IX.5.45–51.

²⁴ PG 48 col.846.B: Ἀλλὰ πόθεν αὕτη γέγονεν ἡ σκληρότης; Ἀπὸ ἀδηφαγίας καὶ μέθης. Τίς τοῦτο φησιν; Αὐτὸς ὁ Μωϋσῆς: Ἐφαγεν Ἰσραὴλ, καὶ ἐνεπλήσθη καὶ ἐλιπάνθη, καὶ ἀπελάκτισεν ὁ ἡγαπημένος. Καθάπερ γὰρ τὰ ἄλογα, ἐπειδὴν δαψύλους ἀπολαύσει φάτνης, εἰς πολυσαρκίαν ἐκβάνα, φιλονεικότερα καὶ δυσκάθεκτα γίνεται, καὶ οὔτε ζυγοῦ, οὔτε ἡνίας, οὔτε ἡνίοχου χειρὸς ἀνέχεται. Translation by William Wilson. *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 2*. Ed. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, A. Cleveland Coxe. New York 1885. Source: <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02091.htm>>, retrieved on 09/05/2016>.

²⁵ II.1.1.4 Οἱ μὲν δὴ ἄλλοι ἄνθρωποι ζῶσιν, ἵνα ἐσθίωσιν, ὥσπερ ἀμέλει καὶ τὰ ἄλογα ζῶα, οἷς οὐδὲν ἄλλ’ ἢ γαστήρ ἐστιν ὁ βίος.

²⁶ I am using the following edition of the text: *Clément d’Alexandrie vol. II. Le pédagogue, 3 vols*. Ed. Harl, H.-I. Marrou, C. Matray, C. Mondésert. Paris 1965.

²⁷ PG 60.256 col. B: Τίτι δὲ οὐκ ἔστιν ἀηδὴς ἄνθρωπος πολυσαρκίαν ἀσκῶν, φώκης δίκην συρόμενος.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ PG 60 col.256.G: οὐδὲν ἔχων ἀνθρώπου, ἀλλὰ πάντα θηρίου ἀνθρωπομόρφου· οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ δίγυροι, οἶνου τὸ στόμα ἀπόζον, ἡ ταλαίπωρος ψυχὴ καθάπερ ἐπὶ κλίνης βεβλημένη ὑπὸ τῆς ἀμέτρως ἐγχεομένης ἐωλοκρασίας, τὸ μέγεθος τῶν σαρκῶν περιφέρουσα καθάπερ ἐλέφας.

(ἀγριότης, θηριότης). As Anthony Kaldellis has shown in his recent study, barbaric appetite for food (such as raw meat) and drinking was also a motif of ancient pedigree, and was repeatedly used in Byzantine ethnographical discourse.³⁰ Hayden White has moreover argued, wildness or savagery is a complex of symbols applied by social groups “to designate an area of sub-humanity that was characterized by everything they hoped they were not.”³¹ Following Foucault, White has discerned that such concepts can be filled with diverse contents depending on changing social context wherein they are used.³² Adapting this argument, I would like to contend that fatness-savagery had three essential facets in the eleventh and twelfth-century Byzantine literature. It pointed to *political savagery* (that is: using state’s resources to satisfy one’s personal whims), *social savagery* (that is: living at the expense of others, breaking the rules of commensality) and *religious savagery* (that is: living ungodly). From this perspective then, fatness and gluttony can be perceived as a means of differing oneself as a civilised/socialised man from the ones who break the norms prevalent in society.

Michael Psellos in his *Chronographia* famously portrayed the Emperor Constantine VIII (1025–28), as a man of enormous size (εὐμεγεθής τὸ σῶμα) and of constitution more robust than what is natural (ῥωμαλέωτερον εἶχε τῆς φύσεως). Constantine was a slave of his own lust and stomach, (ἡττητο δὲ καὶ γαστρὸς· καὶ ἀφροδισίων) and his belly possessed a specious ability of receiving foodstuffs of every kind.³³ As a result, Psellos writes, Constantine demonstrated an extraordinary ability to prepare rich sauces, and “subjected his entire nature to appetency” (καὶ πᾶσαν φύσιν πρὸς ὄρεξιν ἐκκαλούμενος).³⁴ Overcome by his bodily desires, he was moreover suffering from gout (τὰ ἄρθρα ἀλγῆμα), so that after his ascension to the throne he had to be carried by his servants.³⁵ Politically “savage” Constantine, who turned his full attention to horse races, beast-fighting shows and gambling, completely neglected the affairs of the state.³⁶

³⁰ A. Kaldellis: *Ethnography after Antiquity: Foreign Lands and Peoples in Byzantine Literature*. Philadelphia 2013.

³¹ H. White: “The Forms of Wildness”. In: Idem. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore 1978, p. 152.

³² Ibidem.

³³ In the original: ‘ἔρρωτό τε αὐτῷ ἡ γαστήρ’. The verb ἔρρωτό seems to suggesting that emperor’s only physical strength was an enormous capacity of his own stomach.

³⁴ *Michaelis Pselli Chronographia*. Ed. D.R. Reinsch. Berlin–Boston 2014, II.7.5.

³⁵ Psell. *Chron.* II.7.6–8. Gout was a traditional disease of the gluttons: J. Lascaratos: “‘Arthritis’ in Byzantium (AD 324–1453): Unknown Information from Non-Medical Literary Sources”. *Annals of the Rheumatic Diseases* 1995, Vol. 54, pp. 951–957. Cf. gout of Alexios III Angelos, mentioned by George Tornikes: J. Darrouzès: “Les discours d’Euthyme Tornikès (1200–1205)”. *Revue des études byzantines* 1968, Vol. 26, No. 9.I, pp. 63–64. For other instances of gout resulting from gluttony, see e.g. Michael Ducas on John V Palaiologos’ podagra: Ducas. *Istoria Turco-Bizantina (1341–1462)*. Ed. V. Grecu. Bucharest 1958, XIII.4.7–12

³⁶ Psell. *Chron.* II.8.1–5.

The argument, goes along the traditional lines which were expounded by Plato, Chrysostom and Clement (among others). The equation of the belly (γαστήρ) to sexual appetite is a motif as old as the Old Testament, where one of the frequent meanings of the above mentioned noun is “female womb”. Plato notoriously ascribes rationality to men and masculinity, while femininity is equalled by him to the lowest of bodily urges, including appetite for food. Similar insights are present in numerous Byzantine literary works. After all, it was Eve who incited Adam to eat the forbidden apple and, in its only extant Byzantine depiction, gluttony is illustrated as a woman, who is carrying an apple in one of her hands.³⁷ By extension, gluttony came to be inextricably connected to sexual lust, as, for instance, John Climacus explicitly states in his *Scala Paradisi*: γαστριμαργία ἐστὶν ... πορνείας πατήρ.³⁸

These are the sources of the equation mark in Psellos’ portrayal of Constantine between being a slave both to one’s stomach (γαστήρ) and lasciviousness (ἀφροδισία). Gambling and frequenting spectacles, mentioned by Psellos, were also standard *topoi* of the discourse of luxury.³⁹ What is interesting, nevertheless, is Constantine’s bestial stature – Psellos in fact does not use the standard term fat (e.g. εὔσαρκος, πολύσαρκος), but the adjectives which point to unnatural, bestial constitution of the Emperor. He is large, unnaturally robust and of nine feet height. Just as other savage animals he is overcome by his appetite and can eat anything – his entire life is given to bodily pleasures.

As numerous studies have shown, the Byzantines were fond of laughing at bodily deformations and disabilities⁴⁰, and fatness was perceived as another occasion to deride an individual. This, along with other traditional lines of discourse on fatness, was widely explored by an anonymous writer of a twelfth-century satire *Timarion*. It has already been noticed that the characters in the dialogue are ostensibly obsessed with food – and this is true especially of Theodore of Smyrna,

³⁷ For Plato in this respect see Ch.G. Allen: “Plato on Women”. *Feminist Studies* 1975, Vol. 2, No. 2/3, pp. 131–138. Ch. Harry, R. Polansky: “Plato on Women’s Natural Ability: Revisiting Republic v and Timaeus 41e3–44d2 and 86b1–92c3”. *Apeiron* 2015, pp. 1–20. The depiction of gluttony has been discussed by J.R. Martin: *Illustrations of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus*. Princeton 1954, p. 68.

³⁸ Climacus, *Scala Paradisi*, PG.88 col. 864.C. On gluttony and femininity in antiquity see S.E. Hill: *Eating to Excess*, pp. 87–88. For the Ancient Greek identification of consumption and sexual fulfilment see: J.N. Davidson: *Courtesans and Fishcakes. The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens*. London 1997.

³⁹ F.H. Tinnefeld: *Kategorien der Kaiserkritik in der Historiographie von Prokop bis Niketas Choniates*. Munich, 1971.

⁴⁰ L. Garland: “The Mockery of the Deformed and Disabled in Graeco-Roman Culture”. In: *Laughter Down the Centuries. Vols. 1–3*. Eds. S. Jaekel, A. Timonen. Turku 1995, pp. 71–84. Idem: ““And His Bald Head Shone Like a Full Moon...”: An Appreciation of the Byzantine Sense of Humour as Recorded in Historical Sources of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries”. *Parergon. Bulletin of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 1990, Vol. 8, pp. 1–31.

the teacher of the main protagonist of the satire.⁴¹ Fatness becomes an incentive not only to expound Theodore's animal appetite but also, to mock his foolishness. When Timarion meets him in Hades, Theodore's stature is already skeleton-like (κατεσκληκώς). In addition, he is full of "wordiness/silly talk" (στομυλίας μεστός)⁴² and he blows up his mouth while talking (τὸ στόμα διογκῶν).⁴³ Not recognised by the protagonist of the satire, Theodore introduces himself, perhaps jokingly, as "the biggest sophist" (τὸν λαμυρώτατον σοφιστήν). The adjective λάμυρος encapsulates the multi-layered meaning of obesity in Byzantium. *LSJ* notes its meanings of full of abbyssness, but also gluttonous and wanton. The lexicon of pseudo-Zonaras moreover equates it with the adjective φλύαρος which carries the meanings of foolery, silly banter and nonsense.⁴⁴ Hence, Theodore's "fullness of words", his unnatural "puffing up" of his cheeks seem to be pointing to the fat body which he possessed during his life on the Earth *as well as* his actual lack of ability as a teacher of rhetoric. Timarion, upon recognising his teacher, is unable to understand how this healthy in vigorous body (ὕγειαν καὶ εὐεξίαν τοῦ σώματος) could possibly belong to Theodore of Smyrna, who was once famous mainly for the enormous size of his body (σώματος εὐμεγεθείαν). As a result of his gluttony and fatness, during his earthly life, Theodore was crippled by gout to such a point that had to be carried in front of the kings to deliver speeches (ἐξήθρωτο τῇ ἀρθρίτιδι) – a motif present already in Psellos' *Chronographia*.⁴⁵ Theodore's current "lean" stature stands in stark contrast to his previous εὐμεγεθία; but even now some degree of monstrosity remains in the sophist, for in Hades he looks like a skeleton (κατεσκληκώς).

Theodore continues to explain to Timarion the reasons for his skinny silhouette. In the course of his earthly life, he earned a lot of gold which he squandered on extravagant meals (ἐστιάσεις πολυτελεῖς) and Sybaritic feasts (Συβαριτικά δεῖπνα).⁴⁶ Just as other tyrants, he lived "by the table".⁴⁷ All of these caused arthritis and exhausted Theodore's body and soul⁴⁸ – it is only in Hades that he

⁴¹ D. Krallis: "Harmless Satire, Stinging Critique: Notes and Suggestions for Reading the Timarion". In: *Power and Subversion in Byzantium*. Ed. D. Angelov, M. Saxby. Aldershot 2013, pp. 221–246. M. Alexiou: "Literary Subversion and the Aristocracy in Twelfth-Century Byzantium: A Stylistic Analysis of the Timarion (ch. 6–10)." *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 1982–83, Vol. 8, pp. 29–45. M. Alexiou: *After Antiquity: Greek Language, Myth and Metaphor*. New York 2002, pp. 96–148.

⁴² For στομυλία see: *Suda* σ.1152.

⁴³ Pseudo-Luciano "Timarione". Ed. A. Romano. Naples 1974, 23.575–576.

⁴⁴ *Iohannis Zonarae lexicon ex tribus codicibus manuscriptis, vol. II*. Ed. J.A.H. Tittmann. Leipzig 1900, Α.1282. Also see the entry on λάμυρος in *Etymologicum magnum*. Ed. T. Gaisford. Oxford 1848, 555.56–58.

⁴⁵ Similarly: *Timarion*, 24.606–10.

⁴⁶ *Timarion*, 24.601–4.

⁴⁷ *Timarion*, 24.607.

⁴⁸ See the twelfth-century *Life of St. Cyril Phileotes*, penned by Nicolaus Kataskepenos. According to the text, a fat body (*polusarkes*) stuffed with food is just like a vessel loaded with cargo

“stopped his maddened stomach” (μαργῶσαν γαστέρα κατέπαυσα), by living on healthy and restrictive diet.⁴⁹ Interestingly enough, the verb μαργαίνω, put into the “mouth” of Theodore in the passage, is a constituent of one of the Greek nouns which denote gluttony (γαστριμαργία), and it has close links with animality and irrationality.⁵⁰

Still, one of the most famous accounts of fat body from twelfth century Byzantium, is known from at least four sources: Niketas Choniates, Nikephoros Chrysoberges, Georgios Tornikes and Nicholas Mesarites – the accounts have already been compared and juxtaposed by A. Kazhdan.⁵¹ Their imagery, as Kazhdan has, perhaps too generally, pointed out, is quite similar. Tornikes, following well-worn literary *topoi*, refers indirectly to John as corpulent (full-of-meat, κρεωβαρής) or monstrous (ἀποφώλιος).⁵² Although gluttony is not named explicitly, direct Biblical quotations clearly associate John to the deadly sin: for instance 12.7–8 quotes *Deuteronomy* 32.15: “Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; filled with food, they became heavy and sleek.” Other terms employed by Tornikes, which clearly point to John’s fatness are: σὰρξ πεφυσημένος, ὑπέρογκος, μέγα σῶμα, ὄλκον τοῦ σῶματος.

John is also indirectly called an apostate (ἀποστάτης), a term which refers not only to his seditious nature, but also to his ungodliness. It must be borne in mind that in the Greek and Byzantine tradition the very area of the bowels (γαστήρ, ἔντερα), especially its upset and deformation, was traditionally linked with blasphemous heretics. This link can be gleaned for instance from Joseph Flavius’ account of Herod’s gastric illness and his subsequent death, or in the popular narrative of Arius’ death in Socrates’ *Hist. Eccles.*⁵³ Seen from this perspective, the epithet associated by Tornikes to John – ἀποστάτης – the obesity of the defector might be alluding to comparable meaning of religious transgression.

In addition, just as in the case of Theodore and Constantine VIII, John’s fatness is an indication of weak physical health. He breathes hard (ἀσθμαίνοντα),

– it cannot be guided and is easily wrecked. *La Vie de Saint Cyrille le Philéote Moine Byzantin*. Ed. E. Sargologos. Bruxelles 1964, 40.6.21 ff. Kataskepenos quotes here Basil’s *Commentary in Isaia*, 2.93.

⁴⁹ *Timarion*, 24.615.

⁵⁰ *LSJ*, cf. Hom. *Il.* 5.882.

⁵¹ A. Kazhdan, S. Franklin: “Nicephorus Chrysoberges and Nicholas Mesarites: a Comparative Study”. In: Idem: *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*. Cambridge 1984, pp. 224–255. Also: Nicholas Mesarites, *Die Palastrevolution des Johannes Komnenos*. Ed. A. Heisenberg. Wurzburg 1907.

⁵² Tornikes, *Or.* I.12.19–20.

⁵³ According to Flavius, Herod died because of intestinal inflammation *Flavii Iosephi opera* vol. 6. Ed. B. Niese. Berlin 1895, I.656–658. Arius’ intestines supposedly burst out after his dissimulated confession of Orthodox faith, *Historia Ecclesiastica* I.38. In: *Socrate de Constantinople, Histoire ecclésiastique (Livres I–VII)*. Ed. P. Maraval, P. Périchon. Paris 2004–2007, I.38.7. For the extensive discussion of the story see: S. Muehlberger: “The Legend of Arius’ Death The Legend of Arius’ Death: Imagination, Space and Filth in Late Ancient Historiography”. *Past and Present* 2015, Vol. 227, No. 1, pp. 3–29.

the enormous weight of his body (ὕπὸ τοῦ βαρέος ἐκείνου καὶ νοθροῦ) causes the throne to break – an image with which adds additional comic force to the scene.⁵⁴ John's body is moreover "blown out" (φυσῶδες),⁵⁵ which might be yet another pun on his gluttony – in the Greek *Materia Medica* the adjective was used to denote the gas-producing food.⁵⁶ John is depicted moreover an Empedoclean monster (τὰ ἐμπεδόκλεια τέρατα), or a gorgon, whose head was to be cut off (and indeed: John was finally decapitated). Kazhdan is certainly right to notice that the portrayal dwells upon deconcretisation, and not many factual details are present in the text. However, what the speech points to at literary level is a complex web of opposite pairs of meanings of good and evil, savage and civilised, beastly and manly, abnormal and ordinary – all of which are conveyed by the references to gluttony and fatness. All of these motives, once again, equate fatness with savagery on the social, religious and political levels.

Yet, the account of Niketas Choniates appears as somewhat more intricate than that of Tornikes. Choniates describes John as possessing large stomach and as a jar-like man: προκοίλιος, πιθώδης.⁵⁷ The jar, πίθος is, of course, a traditional wine-jar, thus the term might potentially point to John's drunkenness, another moral vice endemic to the gluttons.⁵⁸ John's stupidity (or sloth) is alluded to as well – he did not care either to set guards or to reinforce the gates pulled down by his accomplices.⁵⁹ Fatness (and gluttony) and silliness went hand to hand in ancient Greek tradition – for Plato, gluttony meant delving into utter irrationality of base bodily impulses, while Herakles and Odysseus in their popular fat guises were presented as complete fools.⁶⁰ Choniates, just as Tornikes, does not miss the chance mock John's corpulent posture. Animality is present as well in Choniates' portrait – because of his obesity, John "poured out gushes of water just like a dolphin,"⁶¹ and evaporated litres of sweat. Due to this sickly excessive perspiration John is portrayed emptying the entire vessels of water (ὕδατος ὅλα κεράμια

⁵⁴ Tornikes, *Or.* I.13.19–20. Ὁ δὲ γε θῶκος οὐκέτι θῶκος μείναι πάλιν ἠνέσχετο· κατεάγη γὰρ ἐς τὸ παντελὲς ὑπὸ τοῦ βαρέος ἐκείνου καὶ νοθροῦ σώματος.

⁵⁵ An aspect which is present in other accounts of the revolt. A. Kazhdan, S. Franklin: *Studies...*, pp. 244–245.

⁵⁶ As *TLG* search indicates, a vast majority of instances of uses of this adjective is restricted to medical sources.

⁵⁷ vD 526.14–15: προκοίλιος δ' ὦν καὶ πιθώδης. Trapp translates προκοίλιος as "mit vorge-wölbtem Bauch" (*LBG*).

⁵⁸ Correspondingly, Psellos in his canon (Psell. *Poem.* XXX) against the drunken monk Jacob, who "squeezes wine into the *pithos* of his stomach" (XXII.11–12: ἀποθλίβει τὸν οἶνον ὥσπερ εἰς πίθον τὸν στόμαχον); XXII.30 and 70: ἐν τῇ τοῦ πίθου γαστρί. Jacob is otherwise presented as an unsatiated animal (XXII.13 ζῶον ἀκόρεστον) with a "broad stomach (XXII.23: πλατεῖαν γαστέρα) which is familiar only to the business of drinking (XXII.67: τῇ ἐργασίᾳ τῆς μέθης). I am referring to the following edition: *Michaelis Pselli Poemata*. Ed. L.G. Westerink. Leipzig–Stuttgart 1992.

⁵⁹ vD 527.47–48.

⁶⁰ See the discussion in: S.E. Hill: *Eating to Excess*, pp. 81–102.

⁶¹ vD 527.50: κατὰ δέλφιναν ἀναφυσών.

ἐκκενῶν). Finally, John, the enormous beast, fails in his revolutionary attempt and is killed in a beastly manner: his head is cut off and, still spilling blood, suspended on the arch in the agora. In one of the last scenes of the episode, the emperor Alexios III stares at John's corpse which appears to him to be larger than a swollen gigantic bull (ὕπερ βοῦν διωδηκότι μεγαλόπλευρον).⁶²

One more fat "savage" can be found in Choniates' *Chronike Diegesis*. This is a man by the name of Thomas who arrives from Venice as a Patriarch of Constantinople, who is fatter than a well-fed swine (τὴν δὲ σωματικὴν πλάσιν λακκευτοῦ συὸς εὐτραφέστερος).⁶³ His gluttonous effeminacy and lasciviousness is only confirmed by his smoothly-shaved (thus feminine or barbarous)⁶⁴ face (λεῖος) and head, while his chest is "as smooth as a pitch-plaster" (καὶ τὰς ἐνστηθίους παρατετιλμένος τρίχας ἀκριβέστερον δρώπακος). Even his attendants are as closely shaved and as effeminate as their master. The very word λακκευτός (lit. cistern-like, hence also cavernous) seems to be a pun on Thomas' boundless greed.⁶⁵ The term not only points to Thomas' effeminacy, but again it introduces his barbarity and bestiality. Just after this introduction Choniates describes how the Latins, whose love of riches is innate, plundered and defiled Constantinople in 1204.⁶⁶

The abyss of an insatiable belly, a theme which so frequently recurs in the above portraits of the fat, is also widely discussed in the ninth oration of Eustathios of Thessalonike.⁶⁷ In one of the paragraphs which dwells on the idea of fasting and which censures living in luxury, Eustathios leaves a number of remarks which connect fatness with luxury, waste, animality and perdition.⁶⁸ The life of an over-indulgent man, led in between the table and his flesh, is as ungodly as possible. For the chasm of the belly (τὸ τῆς γαστρὸς χάος) can never be filled.⁶⁹ The belly is a cistern, a pit, or even an abyss (which Eustathios describes in the familiar terms:

⁶² vD 528.74–75. Μεγαλόπλευρον: lit. with big flanks (LBG). Cf. Tornikes, *Or.* I.15.23 ff Εἶπεν ἄν τις, ἐπισκώπτων τῷ πτόματι, βοῦν εἶναι τοῦτον, οἷον οἱ ἐκ μακέλλης φυσῶσιν, ἐπὶ αὐτὸν ἀποκτείνωσιν.

⁶³ vD 647.8–9. See also the description of fat George Dishypatos in: vD 266.17–18.

⁶⁴ vD 647.9: ἦν δὲ καὶ λεῖος ξυρῶ τὸ τοῦ προσώπου ἔδαφος. On a general discussion of beard and its meaning in Byzantium see the entry "beards" in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. I. Eds. A.P. Kazhdan, A.M. Talbot, A. Cutler, T.E. Gregory, N.P. Sevcenko. New York–Oxford 1991, p. 274.

⁶⁵ LBG notes the meaning "gemästet" (battered). In the tradition of Old Comedy, known to Choniates through Aristophanic comedies, *lakkos*-derivatives were used as the cognomens of prostitutes and sexual pathics. *Lakkos* denotes a cistern and the metaphor points to enormous capacities for the intake of food and semen of the ones who are cistern-like. See: J.N. Davidson: *Courtesans and Fishcakes*, pp. 176–177. Choniates might be pointing to such a meaning here.

⁶⁶ vD 647.19 ff.

⁶⁷ I am following the newest edition of the speech: *Eustathii Thessalonicensis opera minora (magnam partem inedita)*. Ed. P. Wirth. Berlin 1999.

⁶⁸ Eust. *Or.* 9.165.47 ff.

⁶⁹ Eust. *Or.* 9.165.52–3.

λάκκος, βόθρος, φρέαρ) into which one can so easily fall, but out which it is not easily to recover.⁷⁰ It is a wild animal, a beast (έρπετόν), for it is omnivorous, gluttonous and insatiable.⁷¹ It is like a boundless sea which cannot be sailed through and, as Eustathius continues, “one must refrain from the waters of this sea in order that the wild beasts are not multiplied, and so that the deceiving serpent might not triumph in it.”⁷² This destructive pit (φρέαρ ἀλλότριον) was dug out under ourselves, it violates symmetry, it is always engrossed by living in opulence.⁷³ The mouth of this cistern, therefore, must be necessarily closed – if not completely (as it is simply impossible), it must be reduced through the intake of little nourishment to the size of the tiniest hole.⁷⁴ Only in this way might a man slip from the utter destruction. The passage, in short, summarizes the ideas conveyed by the above-mentioned texts – gluttony is a bestial urge and the individual who serves his stomach becomes a savage animal. The stomach is a chasm which can never be filled to the full. Attempts to fill this beastly abyss will simply end up in one’s utter destruction and downfall to Hades (Hell).⁷⁵

Concluding remarks

Although there is vast amount of work yet to be conducted, this preliminary sketch shows that the Byzantine perceptions of fatness, as represented in the literary sources, show common features in a number of points. Obesity was regularly used by the Byzantine authors as an element of the discourse of luxury, which was founded both on ancient Greek themes (e.g. Plato) and Christian *topoi* (e.g. Biblical tradition; Church Fathers). Since the ancient times fatness seems to have been an emblem of animality, irrationality and beastly living “with one’s mind concentrated on flesh” (νοῦς σάρκινος). Following Hayden White, I have been attempting to suggest that fatness-gluttony can be read as “savagery”, understood as heuristic

⁷⁰ Eust. *Or.* 9.165.53–54: λάκκος αὕτη καὶ βόθρος, εἰς ὃν κύψας τις (μὴ γὰρ γένοιτο κατακυλισθῆναί τινα εἰς αὐτόν).

⁷¹ Eust. *Or.* 9.165.57–60: εἰ δὲ καὶ ἔρπετὰ εἶναι εἶπη τις περὶ αὐτήν ... οὐδὲ τοῦτο ἂν ἔχοι τῆς ἀληθείας ἀπάδειν διὰ τὸ παμφάγον καὶ λίχνον καὶ βορὸν τῆς ἐν ἡμῖν ὀρέξεως.

⁷² Eust. *Or.* 9.165.62–64: Ταύτης τῆς θαλάττης ἐπισχετέον τὰ ἐπιρρέοντα, ἵνα μῆτε τὰ ἔρπετα πληθύνωνται μῆτε ὁ ἐμπαίκτης δράκων καταχορεύῃ αὐτῆς.

⁷³ Eust. *Or.* 9.165.64–65: φρέαρ καὶ ἡ γαστήρ ἀλλότριον ὑπὸ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν ὀρυσσόμενον, ὀπηνίκα πρὸς τρυφῆς πλατύνεται καὶ τὴν συμμετρίαν παραβιάζεται.

⁷⁴ Eust. *Or.* 9.165.66–69. Similarly, Climacus, *Scala Paradisi* PG 88 col. 868.B: Μαλασσόμενοι ἄσκοι ἐπιδιδούσι τῇ χωρήσει, περιφρονούμενοι δὲ οὐ τοσοῦτον δέχονται· ὁ καταναγκάζων γαστέρα αὐτοῦ, ἐπλάτυνεν ἔντερα· ὁ δὲ ἀγωνιζόμενος πρὸς αὐτήν, συνέσφιγξε ταῦτα· τούτων δὲ συσφιγθέντων, οὐ πολλὰ δέχονται· καὶ τότε λοιπὸν γινόμεθα φυσικῶς νηστεύοντες.

⁷⁵ Eust. *Or.* 9.165.70–72.

tool which differentiates the civilised and socialised “us” from barbaric, unsocial, immoral and blasphemous “others”.

I have commenced this article with some remarks on historical analysis of literary sources, analysis which is still much-needed in the area of Byzantine cuisine and diet, but which has its limitations. The field, will not be fully comprehended if we limit our efforts to extrapolating raw data from the texts and ignoring literary artistry, complexity and cultural milieu of their authors. Yet, as Stanley Fish in his much-debated theory of “interpretive communities” has stressed, the immense significance of cultural context on our interpretation of a literary text. According to Fish, the individuals who participate in common educational system, share similar set of social values, perceptions of both the reality and the self become also the members of the interpretive communities and “share interpretive strategies” for understanding the written works.⁷⁶ These strategies therefore deeply influence the understanding of what is read by the individuals within a given cultural context.⁷⁷ Following these lines, I would like to conclude with a remark that Byzantine representations of consumption need be considered within their specific and complex background so that their hidden meaning can be uncovered, at least to some degree.

⁷⁶ S.E. Fish: “Interpreting the ‘Variorum’”. *Critical Inquiry* 1976, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 465–485.

⁷⁷ For similar issues regarding contextual reading of 10th- to 11th-century Byzantine military compendia see: C. Holmes: “Political Culture and Compilation Literature in the Tenth and 11th centuries: Some preliminary Inquiries”. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 2010, Vol. 64, pp. 55–80.